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ABSTRACT

The Parent-School Communications Questionnaire (PSCQ) is based on Katz and Kahn's (1967) notion of a directly proportional relationship between the permeability of the boundaries and the openness of a social system. The instrument is constructed to measure parental perceptions of five factors that seem heuristically to compose the social-psychological boundaries of a school, and to elicit information about the degree and quality of interaction and influence of parents with the personnel of their child's school. The results of the field test of the PSCQ indicate its potential as a tool to assist school administrators in testing parental perceptions of the current status of their schools. (Author)

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THE PARENT SCHOOL COMMUNICATIONS QUESTIONNAIRE: A MEASURE OF SCHOOL BOUNDARY PERMEABILITY[1]

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A largely untapped area of study in school- community relationships is concerned with the nature and permeability of the boundary lines that mark off a school from its constituent parent community. This paper deals with (1) the conceptualization of what seem to be some factors that have the effect of being school-parent boundaries and (2) the development of an instrument that would quantify the boundary line notion with regard to permeability: the ease with which the lines may be crossed.

Katz and Kahn (1967) elaborate on Lewin's (1951) concept of group boundary lines and their permeability. They suggest that a social system is surrounded by a psychological boundary insulating it from its environment. The degree to which this boundary is permeable to input from the environment of the social system is directly proportional to the openness of the system. Applying this concept to a school situation, an openness continuum concerning parental input into the school might range from totally closed; i.e. a school where parents were completely isolated from interating with school personnel on any matters, to completely open; i.e. a school where parents were totally free to enter any classroom at any time and interact with all school personnel. This continuum may be applied to boundary permeability. The totally closed school suggests a solidification of system boundaries while the completely open school reflects extremely permeable boundaries.

To operationalize the concept of boundary permeability, some three hundred questions concerning the methods parents use to contact school

personnel, the techniques used by the school to communicate with parents, the impact of parent's groups on the school and the quality of verbal interaction between parents and school personnel were generated. By eliminating redundancies and negative statements, the number of questions was reduced to seventy-five; fifteen for each of the following dimensions:

1. Mechanical- Statements on the dimension concern the process through which the parents make contact with school personnel. The mechanical questions elicit information as to the best way to contact school personnel, difficulties encountered in contacting a teacher or the principal, and the layers of the organization that must be penetrated before contact with the desired individual is made. Though the "mechanical" dimension by itself is not psychologically oriented, it is assumed that there is psychological fallout attached to it.

2. Outreach- These statements concern the attempts by school personnel to contact parents. Questions deal with the conditions surrounding a school-to- parent contact, perceptions about the parent-teacher organization, perceptions of the principal as a facilitator of parent input and parent-teacher problem solving.

3. Organizational Climate- This dimension contains statements concerning parental perceptions of the general character of the school organization. Questions elicit information about the atmosphere of the school and parent-teacher contacts, the perceived feelings of teachers toward parents and the ability of teachers to receive negative feedback.

The Organizational Climate dimension attempts to measure the parents' feelings about the total school organization, rather than their relation-

ship with specific members of the organization.

4. Interpersonal Climate- Statements in this dimension are relevant to the quality and nature of parent-teacher interaction. These questions get at the parent's perception of interpersonal atmosphere surrounding their contacts with school personnel; the feeling of the parent when contacted by the school, the degree of honesty or evasiveness of school personnel during the contact and the perceived attitude of school personnel towards parents.

Interpersonal Climate statements are designed to tap parental perceptions of their relationship with specific members of the school organization.

5. Influence- Items on this dimension concern the parent's perception of the impact of their relations with school personnel. Included are statements relevant to the amount of attention school personnel pay to parental input, response to group and individual input and the role of school personnel and parents in problem solving.

A five point Likert-type scale was devised for responses. Respondents were asked to rate each statement on the continuum of "this is always true" to " this is never true." They were asked to answer to each item on the basis of what they knew or felt to be the case at their child's school, whether or not they had any direct experience with a particular situation.

A sample of eight hundred and four parents were randomly selected from school registration cards of each school in a six thousand nine hundred and thirty-five pupil district. The sample was approximitely twelve percent of the population. The district was composed

of eleven elementary schools, two junior high schools, and one senior high school. Questionnaires were mailed to the prospective respondents along with a demographic data sheet and a stamped return envelope. Three hundred and eighty-five of forty-eight percent of the completed questionnaires were returned.

Concurrent with the mailing of the PSCQ, face-to-face interviews were attempted with a random selection of five parents per grade level in each elementary school, and ten parents per grade level in the junior and senior high schools.

Parents who received the PSCQ were eliminated from the sample. Thus interviews were attempted with three hundred and ninety parents with three hundred sixteen actually interviewed.

A comparison of the interview data with the PSCQ responses from each school was intended to act as an informal validity check of the instrument.

Interview teams were composed of undergraduate students enrolled in a school- community relations course. Teams of five or six were assigned to each school.

The interview schedule was composed of five open-ended questions to correspond with the five PSQC dimensions. Interview teams were instructed to funnel the respondent's answers to elicit specifics about their contacts with the schools. Interviews were asked to characterize the parent's perception of the permeability of the school on each dimension of a five point scale. During a twelve hour training period, interviewers used this scale to rate a series of seven role play interviews. The interviewers averaged a seventy- eight percent(78%) agreement on these scales.

Following the completion of the interviews, means for each school on each dimension were computed and compared with the dimensional means of the PSCQ returns for each school. As the interview-PSCQ comparison was intented to act as an informal validity check of the instrument, and any statistical description of this comparison would be open to question, tests were not performed on this data. However, it may be stated that an indicant of validity is mirrored by the fact that in twelve of the thirteen schools, interview and instrument means were in close agreement. Irregularities in the part of the interviewing team may account for discrepencies between instrument and interview means in the remaining school.

A factor analysis was conducted on the PSCQ responses. The five factors in the present form of the PSCQ are the result of an orthogonal Varimax rotation performed on the principal axis clusters yielded by the factor analysis of the instrument. The results of the analysis reduced the number of items in each factor from fifteen to seven on the Mechanical Dimension, eleven on Outreach, eleven on Organizational Climate, twelve on Interpersonal Climate, and nine on Influences.

The items in each factor follow:

Factor I: Mechanical:

1. If my youngster is having a problem in school, the best way to contact the teacher is in writing rather than by phone.
2. Before talking with a teacher I feel that I must first contact the principal.

3. It is difficult to get in touch with a teacher on the phone.
4. It is difficult to get in touch with the principal on the phone.
5. In order for me to see my youngster's teacher, I need only stop in at the school office without prior contact and ask.
6. In order for me to see the principal, I need only stop in at the school office without prior contact and ask.
7. The school secretary will forward my message to the principal or the teacher.

Factor II: Outreach:

1. My youngster's teacher contacts me personally when something goes wrong with his work.
2. My youngster's teacher contacts me personally when his work has been progressing particularly well.
3. The principal takes initiative in contacting parents about school matters.
4. The principal encourages parents to contact teachers about their children's school activities.
5. Teachers resist attending parent-teacher functions.
6. Teachers cooperate willingly with the parent group in discussing school issues.
7. Parent nights at school are events which I feel are useful and instructive.
8. Parents have a standing invitation to visit their

youngster's classes with a few days notice.

9. After I have met with my youngster's teacher concerning a problem, the teacher contacts me with the follow-up information about the situation.
10. Ample notice is given by the school to inform me about parent organizational functions.
11. Most communications from the school are impersonal in tone.

Factor III: Organizational Climate:

1. Teachers see parents as a nuisance.
2. Teachers seem threatened by parents who ask questions.
3. Teachers are friendly and warm in their communications with parents.
4. When I walk my into my youngster's classroom I feel uncomfortable.
5. When I walk into the school I sense a friendly, warm atmosphere.
6. Teachers in the school like parents to contact them about their child.
7. Teachers do not think highly of the parent organization of the school.
8. The atmosphere at parent-teacher gatherings is strained and tense.
9. Teachers in the school are willing to listen to negative things I have to say about what is going on in school.
10. The principal is a limiting force on parent organization

activities.

11. The principal actively supports the parent organization.

Factor IV: Interpersonal Climate:

1. I like to talk about my youngster's work with his teacher.
2. My youngster likes me to see his teacher on his behalf.
3. The principal sees parents as being a nuisance.
4. When I get a notice from a teacher that he wants to see me about my youngster, I feel tense.
5. When I talk with my youngster's teacher, I feel he is holding back information I would like to have.
6. When I talk to the principal, I feel that he is evasive.
7. I have no hesitancy at all about contacting a teacher about my youngster's work in school.
8. The principal is willing to listen to negative things I have to say about what's going on in the school.
9. If I complain to a teacher about my youngster's negative reaction to his teaching, I am afraid that the teacher will act negatively toward my youngster.
10. The principal sees parents as a source to help him.
11. I feel free to stop and chat with teachers in the school.
12. The school secretary is helpful to me when I visit the school.

Factor V: Influences

1. Parent groups have no real influence on the school.
2. I feel that when I talk with the principal I make an impact on him.

3. I feel that when I talk with my youngster's teacher it makes an impression on him.
4. I trust the principal to communicate parental concerns to the teachers.
5. The principal only responds to pressure from a group of parents, not individuals.
6. Teachers seem to pay attention to parents.
7. The principal pays attention to parents.
8. The principal actively uses the parent organization to help in solving school problems.
9. I am made to feel that I as a parent, and not the school, must make all the changes to solve a problem.

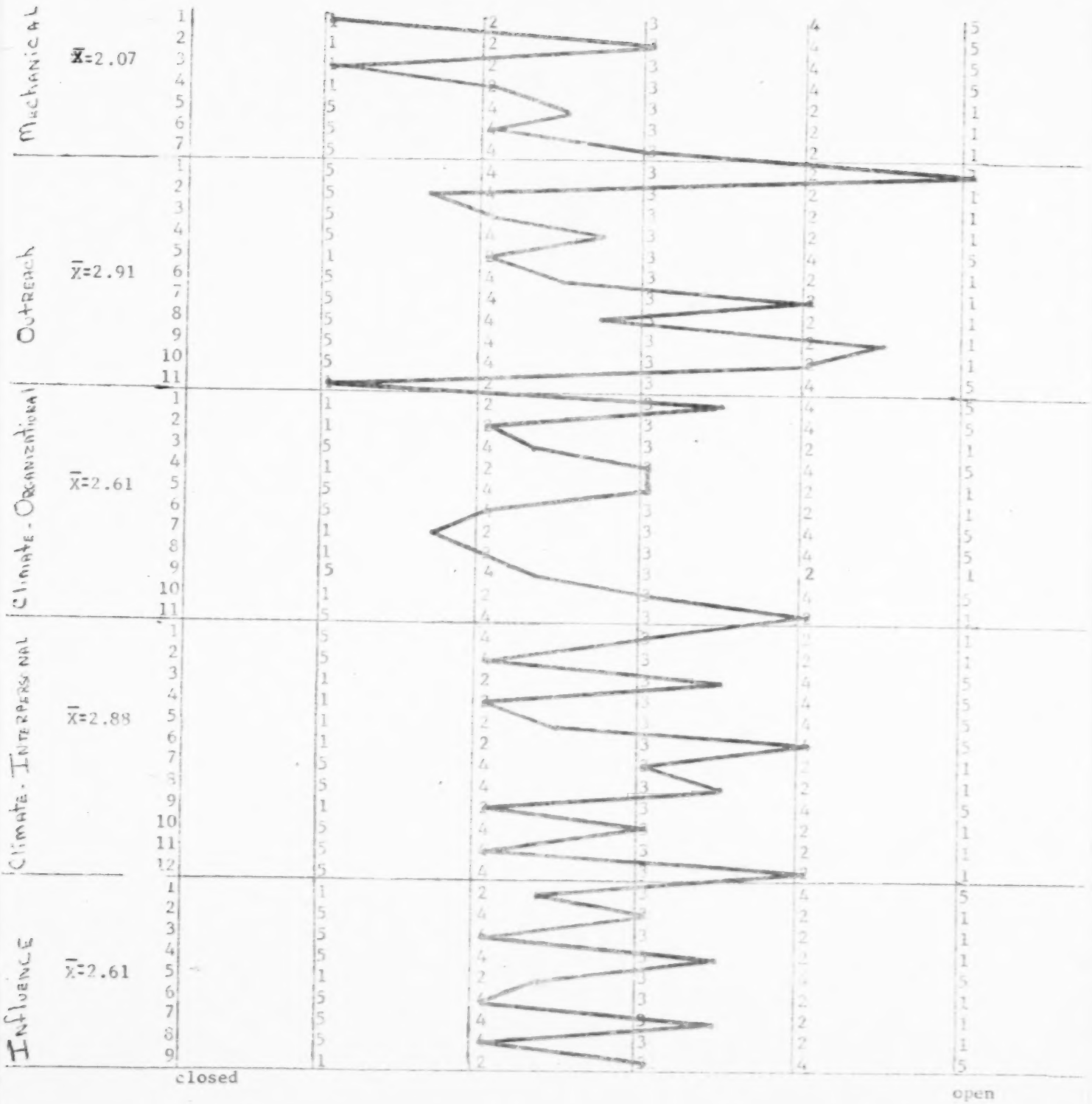
Item means may be derived from a tabulation of PSCQ responses. These means may be plotted on a profile form to enable feedback to be given in an understandable graphic manner(figure I).

A possible way to interpret PSCQ results is through studying factor means and individual item response. Computation of factor means is facilitated by a conversion of raw scores from the PSCQ to a common 1 (closed) to 5 (open) scale. Thus, the higher the score, the more open or permeable the boundaries on a specific dimension.

Using Elmboro School (figure I) as an example, the PSCQ Profile indicates that parents seem to perceive the school as tending to be closed on all dimensions.

The mean score of 2.07 on the mechanical factor may be interpreted to mean that parents must follow a rather strutured procedure to initiate contact with school personnel. Parents must make contact in writ-

PARENT-SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PROFILE



Name of School Elmboro Elementary

N = 137

Figure I

ing (item M-1) as phone calls to either teacher or the principal will not be fruitful (items M-3,M-4). Leaving messages with the school secretary is not a guarantee that contact has been made (item M-7). In general parents contact the principal before speaking with a teacher (item M-2) and issue advanced notice of their visit(items M-5, M-6).

A mean score of 2.91 on the Outreach Dimension seems to indicate that school personnel do initiate some contacts with parents. These contacts are usually made by the teachers when the child's work is underpar (items O-1, O-2, O-3). Teachers usually provide follow-up information after the initial contact (item O-9). The principal seems to play a somewhat passive role in encouraging parents to contact the school (items O-4, O-8). Although parents perceive formal Parent-Teacher functions as useful (item O-7), they sense resistance on the part of the teachers during these functions (items O-5, O-6, OC-7,OC-8).

The climate of Elmboro School may be characterized as rather cool and business-like (organizational climate mean-2.61). Parents perceive teachers to be threatened by their questions and comments(items OC-2, OC-6, OC-9). Although the principal is perceived to actively support the parents' organization (item OC-11), he may limit their activities (item OC-10). From the parents' point of view, the atmosphere at Elmboro elicits neither warm nor uncomfortable feelings (items OC-4, OC-5).

The mean score of 2.88 on the Interpersonal Climate dimension indicates that parents have a generally neutral feeling about their interaction with school personnel. Parents feel that a negative reaction to a teacher may have ramification on their child(item IC-9). The principal is seen as willing to accept negative feedback from

parents (items IC-8, IC-6), although he does not actively encourage their help in school related problems(item IC-10). Some feelings of tension and supression of information are perceived during parent-teacher contacts (item IC-4, IC-5).

The Influence Dimension mean of 2.61 indicates that parents do not have a high degree of impact on the school. Parents perceive that individuals, rather than groups, have a greater influence on the principal (items I-1, I-2,I-5, I-7 I-8), but that this influence is negligible. Parents feel that their impact on teachers at Elmboro is very minimal (items I-3, I-6).

The results of the administration of the PSCQ combined with the content analysis of the interview data seem to indicate that the permeability of the boundaries of a school is quantifiable and may be viewed as an indicant of the openness of school personnel to input from their environment.

The potency of the PSCQ rests in its ability to provide school administrative personnel with a diagnostic tool for ascertaining parental perceptions of the school and the climate of opinions in the school environment towards the school.

Information accrued from the instrument may be used as base-line data for structuring or improving school-community programs. For the administrator who strives to make his school open to parental input, the feedback from the PSCQ may highlight areas for staff development as well as provide him with information concerning the parent's perception of the principal.

In an era when shools may be characterized as in a state of flux

with a variety of experimentation in staffing patterns, curriculum and instruction taking place, a comparison of the results of periodic administrations of the PSCQ to a selection of the school's parent population may be used as a gauge of the amount of parental input that should be taken into account in implementing change.

Although the PSCQ provides a measurement of the permeability of the school's boundaries, further refinement and perhaps expansion of the scope of the instrument is needed. The following questions remain to be answered:

Is the parent's perception of the permeability of the boundaries of the school related to their educational values?

Is there a relationship between the teacher's perception of the school as a social system and the parent's perception of the school?

Are there relationships between the demographic characteristics of the parent population (occupation, education, etc.) and the manner in which they perceive the permeability of the school boundaries?

Is the degree of permeability related to parent satisfaction with school programs?

Finally, though this study dealt with the school and its parent constituency , a productive research extension of it would be to apply the boundary-permeability idea to the relationship between schools and their potential task-oriented concerns. For example,are schools relatively open or closed to supervision, new program ideas, organizational training, and so forth?

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